

# **Southeast Asia as a Prospective Area of China-Russia Cooperation: the Belt and Road Initiative Opportunity**

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While the Belt and Road Initiative (the BRI) offers its participants plenty of unique opportunities, the gap between promising economic feedback and disturbing security implications is growing, which undermines the BRI prospects. As the BRI further proceeds, given its global reach and strategic orientation, contradictions between China and its partners will multiply. A case to substantiate this assessment is the BRI implementation in Southeast Asia, which mirrors the challenges this project encounters globally and which can be used as a testing ground for elaborating on effective solutions to tackle the emerging problems. The research question is why cooperation between China and Russia in Southeast Asia can narrow the afore-mentioned gap, which specific directions are the most promising, and which limiting factors Beijing and Moscow will have to take into consideration. The authors argue that cooperation between China and Russia in Southeast Asia in the BRI context can narrow the spectrum of challenges as well as decrease apprehensions of the ASEAN member states, the BRI generates. Cooperation between China and Russia, in case the latter increases its economic profile in Southeast Asia, has sufficient potential to form the international context conducive to keeping the present and prospective contradictions manageable. This practice, or its components, can be expanded to other regions of Eurasia to the best advantage of China and its BRI partners.

**Keywords:** Belt and Road Initiative, economy, infrastructure, security, China, Southeast Asia, ASEAN, Russia.

**Возможности китайско-российского сотрудничества  
в Юго-Восточной Азии в контексте инициативы  
«Пояса и пути».**

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Инициатива «Один пояс — один путь» (ИПП) предлагает своим участникам уникальные возможности, однако на её перспективах начинает сказываться нарастающий разрыв между многообещающей экономической отдачей и вызывающими обеспокоенность последствиями в сфере безопасности. В ходе дальнейшего развития ИПП, по причине её глобальности и стратегической направленности, противоречия между Китаем и его партнёрами будут множиться. Названную тенденцию можно наблюдать на примере реализации проекта в Юго-Восточной Азии: данный регион отражает вызовы, с которыми ИПП сталкивается на глобальном уровне, при этом он способен служить тестовой площадкой для выработки эффективных решений возникающих проблем. Исследовательские вопросы заключаются в том, почему сотрудничество между Китаем и Россией в Юго-Восточной Азии может сократить вышеупомянутый разрыв, разработка каких направлений наиболее перспективна и какие сдерживающие факторы Пекину и Москве будет необходимо принять во внимание. С точки зрения авторов, российско-китайское взаимодействие в рамках проекта позволяет сузить спектр вызовов, порождаемых при реализации ИПП, и снизить возникающую при её осуществлении обеспокоенность государств, входящих в АСЕАН. Сотрудничество между Пекином и Москвой, при условии усиления последней своих экономических позиций в Юго-Восточной Азии, обладает достаточным потенциалом для формирования международного контекста, позволяющего удерживать существующие и потенциальные противоречия в контролируемых рамках. Такая практика, или её отдельные компоненты, может быть распространена на другие регионы Евразии, что наилучшим образом отвечает интересам Китая и его партнёров по ИПП.

**Ключевые слова:** инициатива «Один пояс — один путь», экономика, инфраструктура, безопасность, Китай, Юго-Восточная Азия, АСЕАН, Россия.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a global mega-strategy with far-reaching implications. As it proceeds, contradictions between China and its partners will inevitably appear. Their main line, a widening gap between the economic feedback and the political aftereffects of the BRI, is apparent even at present.

This is especially relevant to Southeast Asia, through which the PRC lays several strategically important parts of the BRI. As disturbing aftereffects of the BRI grow, for China to work out effective instruments to resolve emerging contradictions becomes a timely exercise. Arguably, among these instruments cooperation between China and Russia in Southeast Asia as part of the BRI implementation may produce encouraging results.

Starting from a review of the BRI evolution, the paper proceeds with discussing the specificity of its Southeast Asian dimension to finally turn to prospects for cooperation between China and Russia in Southeast Asia. The conclusion summarizes the foregoing analysis.

#### WHAT IS THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE ABOUT?

China announced its mega-strategy the Belt and Road Initiative in autumn 2013 [2]. However, in the years that followed China did not specify its parameters and expected outcomes. At international conferences organized by Chinese think-tanks, the participants expressed diverging views that ranged from “the Chinese initiative is the new economic development model” (this was stated mostly by experts from developing countries) to “the Chinese initiative is a soap bubble” (expressed primarily by participants from developed countries). Presentations of Chinese scholars did not add much clarity. In these circumstances, observers came to the conclusion that the PRC lacked a nuanced vision of the BRI.

The milestone event which finalized the ideological accomplishment of the Chinese initiative was the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, which was convened in Beijing on May 14–15, 2017. Among other participants, it was attended by the Russian President V. Putin, the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, the IMF Managing Director Christine Lagarde, the World Bank President Jim Yong Kim, Pakistan’s Prime-Minister Nawaz Sharif, and others. India did not participate in protest against the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor as part of the BRI [19].

According to Xi Jinping, the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation held in April 2019 was larger, more meaningful and productive than the previous one. As a result, 283 agreements worth more than 64 billion USD were signed [20].

A nuanced and competent assessment of the BRI requires moving beyond China’s traditional mantras like the “harmonious world”, “universal prosperity”, “a community of common destiny” and the like, and identifying the reasons why this initiative appeared. Arguably, several disturbing trends in China’s economy are worthy of note.

First, the Chinese export growth rates which since recently have been getting slower because of the trade war with the US, cannot fully compensate the still insufficient domestic demand. In these circumstances, the key tasks set by the Chinese leadership — to shift from the economic growth model based mainly on exports to the domestic consumption as the key growth driver — is not performed.

Second, the excessive production facilities, mainly, in the glass, cement and metallurgical industries aimed to satisfy demand for relatively cheap Chinese products steadily decrease in competitiveness. Third, of note is the high-level debt of provincial authorities and state-run companies, partly provoked by the government program in order to stimulate the economic growth and to mitigate the negative implications of the global financial and economic crisis 2008—2009. As the global economic situation becomes increasingly volatile, to rectify these imbalances by the “business-as-usual” policy becomes problematic.

Stimulating domestic demand by monetary or fiscal instruments does not compensate low growth rates of Chinese exports, because the domestic market does not need such amounts of commodities. Measures to increase exports by means of subsidies, for instance, preferential credit for exporters, are not effective either. To close depressive enterprises, not to mention sectors with redundant industries, would not be permissible, because they provide employment for the population and generate tax revenues for provincial authorities.

Theoretically, the Belt and Road Initiative is capable of responding to the afore-mentioned tasks. The solutions include expanding the demand for products of China’s presently depressive enterprises and the consumption base of “new” Chinese high-tech products, manufactured in strategic sectors covered by the “Made in China 2025” program. A special priority of the BRI is to contribute to the economic development of China’s inland regions like Xinjiang-Uigur Autonomous Region, Autonomous Region of Inner Mongolia, Ningxia-Hui Autonomous Region, and Gansu Province. As part of the BRI, China implements its domestic development programs, for instance “Going Westward” (the development of the western China), “Restoring the Industrial Base of North-East China”, as well as “Central China Development”. The aim is to narrow the development gaps inside the PRC by relocating resource-intensive industries from the east to the north and north-west of China.

However, China’s partners grow apprehensive about the prospects of the BRI labelling it as China’s “debt diplomacy”. The loans issued by the Chinese financial institutions in the BRI framework are relatively expensive (the average interest rate of Chinese loans is 5—6% per year, while, for example, the loans of international banks cost 2—3% per year) [12]. The BRI projects not always comply with the international standards of financial transparency as well as with environmental and technological safety regulations. The BRI projects are realized mostly by Chinese companies and Chinese power. These factors generate criticism in the recipient countries.

These sentiments partially resonate with more balanced assessments of the BRI in China. In April 2018, speaking at a conference in Guangzhou, Li Ruogu, the former Chairman and President of the Export-Import Bank of China, admitted that most of the countries that take part in the initiative are not capable to contribute to it financially, which undermines the BRI prospects [10]. In June 2018, Wang Yiming, Deputy-Director of Development Research Center under the PRC State Council, noted that notwithstanding the contribution from the financial organizations (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, BRICS New Development Bank, China Development Bank, Export-Import Bank of China, Silk Road Fund), the annual deficit of funding is around 500 billion USD [10].

In Wang Yiming's view, China itself still needs investments to implement its domestic programs — for example, the Jingjinzi Initiative (a mega-agglomeration that would include the cities of Beijing and Tianjin as well as the province Hebei) and the development of the Pearl River Delta area (another mega-agglomeration including the cities of Hong Kong, Macao, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, et al.). By available estimates, to realize these projects China might need about 1 trillion USD annually [9].

In light of this, in the mid-term perspective the Chinese initiative of One Belt, One Road will become less Chinese and more international, linking parts of the BRI with the national development projects of the BRI partners. The growing competition between the US and China for financing commercially profitable infrastructure projects in the Asia-Pacific region would probably make the Chinese capital less expensive.

Realizing that the implementation of the BRI will not be an easy task, the PRC leadership also understands that the BRI should be permanently upgraded. Assuming that China is still unable to present a nuanced vision on the BRI, the practice will be the only indication of the extent to which China has modified its project. At this juncture, testing grounds at the regional level are necessary.

## THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN DIMENSION OF THE BRI

Southeast Asia is an important component of the BRI. Through this region, the PRC plans to implement two land corridors — the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor — and part of the Maritime Sea Silk Road of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This attention to Southeast Asia is explicable considering that China declared that the implementation of the BRI must start from the regions that are geographically close to its borders [18]. In Southeast Asia, the PRC can testify how to best synergize the land and the maritime section of the BRI. Assessing the BRI from the Southeast Asian perspective, the following points are worthy of note.

First, China plans to integrate the BRI with the previously institutionalized regional cooperation initiatives in Southeast Asia. Among such initiatives, “the Great Mekong” Economic Growth Zone, China-ASEAN Free Trade Zone (to which Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar joined in 2015), as well as the Lanchang-Mekong cooperation format, can be specifically mentioned.

The Lanchang-Mekong cooperation is a special case in point. Launched in March 2016, it covers China, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam [5]. As an unofficial leader of this format, China can not only finance infrastructure projects in Indochina, but also provide its partners with the Chinese technological solutions. Although to realign these formats may be a difficult task, for China to capitalize upon its previously developed resources is perfectly logical. What matters is not the extent to which the Mekong states welcome the BRI but the existence of institutional mechanisms that allows China to integrate its strategic assets.

Second, China links the implementation of the BRI with the strategic planning of the Association as outlined in the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025 [6]. The main shortcoming of ASEAN’s vision is lack of clarity of the sources of financing the cross-border infrastructure in Southeast Asia. The Asian Development Bank estimates that the overall ASEAN expenses on infrastructure in 2010–2020 account for \$1.09 trillion, while the ASEAN Infrastructure Development Fund, founded in 2011, can allocate only \$300 million per year [7, p. 2–6]. China’s readiness to make huge investment in the infrastructure of Southeast Asia, primarily in the port facilities of these countries, sparks their positive reaction.

Third, for China Southeast Asia is a convenient testing ground of the “China-centric globalization” with the subsequent translating this experience to other Eurasian regions. Like in the rest of Eurasia, in Southeast Asia expectations for a consolidating agenda of cooperation are growing as China offers its partners valuable, if not indispensable, instruments to maintain long-term and sustainable development. Realizing these factors, China will intensify its policy there.

However, from the Southeast Asia perspective China’s rhetoric about the virtues of the inclusive development agenda becomes less convincing when theory meets practice. The South China Sea issue is a case in point. The PRC’s negative reaction to the verdict of the Permanent Court of Arbitration made in July 2016 [17] disillusioned the association about the consequences of the BRI. As it is implemented, numerous contradictions between economic actors, be they large state corporations or SMEs, will inevitably appear. To resolve these issues, instances of international law are most appropriate. But how Beijing really, rather than declaratory, sees the international law, was demonstrated by its non-recognition of the PCA verdict.

The PRC’s follow-up policy towards the Philippines – agreements on major investments in the development of the Philippines’ infrastructure after President Duterte’s visit to Beijing in October 2016, as well as Manila’s

subsequent intention to dissociate itself from any contradictions with China over the South China Sea issue [14] — convinced ASEAN that the inclusive cooperation agenda is more about the long-term interests of China than of its BRI partners.

The ASEAN states are also apprehensive about the economic implications of the BRI. Scholars from Southeast Asia argue that Chinese loans are expensive while the quality of Chinese production is not necessarily superior [11]. As a result, many projects are suspended while alternative possibilities to attract financial allocations are explored. The best example to substantiate this point is Malaysia under the new leadership.

Prospects for the BRI in Southeast Asia may become bleak owing to contradictions between the BRI partners. Border disputes between Bangladesh and Myanmar over border issues, as well as India's mixed, if not hostile, reaction to the BRI, made China change the China-India-Myanmar-Bangladesh Economic Corridor to China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. In September 2018, China and Myanmar signed a Memorandum of Understanding on this project [15]. Although to translate these plans into reality will take a long time, of note are unforeseen developments in the international context in which the BRI is implemented and on which the PRC, at least at present, is unable to influence.

But most importantly, ASEAN fears that it can become part of China's common security system built upon the BRI. Linking two conceptually important terms — development and security — China positions itself as the natural leader of the BRI geographical area as Beijing provides its partners with possibilities for long-term development, by means of which their security — understood from the economic and social perspective — is guaranteed. For the association, this means that ASEAN-led multilateral dialogue platforms — the ASEAN Regional Forum, the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus Eight and the East Asia Summit — can decrease their significance in the priorities of ASEAN partners [13].

In sum, it makes sense to argue that the implementation of the BRI in Southeast Asia, although with local specificities, mirrors the challenges that China encounters at the global level. Consequently, the solution found in Southeast Asia can be translated to other regions of the Eurasian continent.

## COOPERATION WITH RUSSIA AS A SOLUTION

As an instrument to eliminate the afore-discussed gaps between economy and security in China's policy in Southeast Asia, the Russian factor comes to the fore. Several points rise to prominence.

First, cooperation with Russia can convince the ASEAN states that China is not willing to change the regional status quo. This assessment is substantiated by Russia's proposal made at the Brunei session of the ADMM+8 on the indivisible security in the Asia-Pacific region [4]. Although much remains

to be done to fill this declaration with practical substance, of note is the international context that Russia favors. The implications for China-Russia cooperation are twofold. On the one hand, China will be portrayed as an internationally responsible power while on the other, China and Russia can join efforts in using their possibilities to the region's — as well as to their own — best advantage. The aftereffect will be an international milieu in which ASEAN will comfortably perform its function as the coordinator of the Asia-Pacific multilateral negotiations.

For Russia itself, as the crisis in its relations with the “collective West” unfolds, the significance of the ASEAN-led multilateral dialogue platforms is increasing. They provide Russia with permanent channels of communication with its Asia-Pacific partners at three levels — the political (the ARF), the military (the ADMM+8) and the top (the EAS). In light of this, Russia possesses institutional possibilities to shape the Asia-Pacific political-security agenda — an advantage that Moscow conspicuously lacks in the Euro-Atlantic.

Second, Russia has possibilities to eliminate ASEAN's fears about the threat presented by the Digital Silk Road. ASEAN experts express concerns that the Chinese IT companies, which construct digital infrastructure in Southeast Asia, prepare the groundwork for the Chinese security services to monitor the traffic of data [16]. Regardless of whether or not these apprehensions are substantiated, China's broadening spectrum of instruments to influence upon the national security of its BRI partners is evident. If so, ASEAN member states' fears aggravated by the afore-discussed concerns about the course and nature of the BRI will only intensify. As a country with a superior technological school, Russia can provide the ASEAN states with competences, technologies and equipment to ensure the security of their critical infrastructure and combat cyber-espionage. Results achieved in the frameworks of multilateral cooperation in which China, Russia and the ASEAN states, or the association as a whole, participate and which focus on strengthening the cyber-security will be the best evidence to demonstrate that anti-Chinese speculations on any kind of “unfair play” behind the Digital Silk Road are groundless.

Third, Russia's policy can add substance to China's narrative about the inclusive development. Beyond Southeast Asia, cooperation in the Arctic is of particular note. Considering that the Arctic possesses significant reserves of oil, gas and other minerals, as well as provides alternative transportation routes between Europe and the Asia-Pacific region, the development of the Arctic naturally corresponds to the PRC's inclusive development narrative. Given that China and Singapore have been observers in the Arctic Council since 2013 while China declared that it is a near-Arctic state [8], various forms of cooperation between Russia, China and Singapore, including the monitor of the Arctic ocean level, the joint production of equipment to develop the Arctic resources etc. are possible. Acting as a bridge between the Arctic Council and ASEAN, Singapore can deliver the outcomes of this cooperation — in the first

instance, the data on the tempo of the Arctic ice melting — to Southeast Asia. This will be appreciated by ASEAN as for its member states the issues related to the Arctic, for instance, the climate change and the aftereffects of the sea level rise, the energy security and the global sea lanes of communication, are of real significance.

In Southeast Asia, the most promising direction of cooperation between China and Russia is the development of infrastructure. Apart from cooperation with China, ASEAN develops it in relations with the Russian Federation. Following the provisions of the Road Map of Trade, Economic and Investment Cooperation between Russia and ASEAN signed in 2012 [1], the parties have been exploring possibilities to synergize the Road Map and the MPAC. Practical steps, among others, include the demonstration of the delivery of containerized cargo through intermodal routes to the Far Eastern ports of the Russian Federation and the study of possibilities to introduce new methods of transport navigation based on technologically advanced equipment.

This topic was further developed at the Russia-ASEAN Commemorative Summit in Sochi in May 2016. Specifically, the parties pledged to cooperate in the civil aviation sector, as well as to create a network of infrastructure for maritime, road and rail transport, examine opportunities to expand the financing of infrastructure projects in Russia and ASEAN simultaneously synergizing these efforts with the provisions of MPAC 2025 [3].

In the practical realm, cooperation between the states of Southeast Asia and Russia is presented mainly by the projects of the Russian Railways OJSC in Indonesia. They include the construction of a sea coal terminal, a railroad for the transportation of coal mined in East Kalimantan province, as well as the delivery of 1,100 40-ton freight wagons and 40 twin locomotives from Russia to Indonesia. Another example is cooperation between PJSC Gazprom and the Vietnamese state-owned company PetroVietnam in the exploration, production, transportation, sale and processing of hydrocarbons, with the development of the necessary infrastructure as an aftereffect.

The logic of the cooperation between China and Russia actualizes its synergy in cooperation with third countries. In light of this, from the Southeast Asia perspective, cooperation between Russian and Chinese transport companies to link the railways from Russia to China and from China to the countries of Southeast Asia is timely. The AIIB and the Silk Road Foundation can provide these plans with financial support.

China, Russia and the Southeast Asian countries can jointly build seafood storage and processing facilities — for example, refrigeration plants — and later on deliver seafood to the Eurasian Economic Union as part of Russia-China agreement to synergize the SREB and the EAEU.

This cooperation will not be problem-free. Beijing and Moscow will have to consider political factors. Some Russian energy projects are conducted in the South China Sea. Although this is unlikely to dramatically affect China-Russia relations, to take the cooperation beyond politically sensitive spheres will be

advisable. More than that, Southeast Asia is not a unified business-friendly area which may present the Russian and the Chinese business communities with the need to realign their strategies, to which not all companies may be ready.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, China's and Russia's plans to synergies the SREB and the EAEU logically move this interaction beyond the geographical area of the EAEU. Southeast Asia can become a new testing ground for this cooperation with long-term and far-reaching implications.

The afore-discussed directions of cooperation between Russia and China in Southeast Asia as part of the BRI are tasks ahead rather than the reality of the present. To materialize these plans, much time and effort are needed. Especially since in the future the Russia-China relations are unlikely to forever remain as good as they are now, and the window of opportunities may close. But what matters at present is the nascent bid for cooperation with Russia in the priorities of China and the ASEAN states, to which Moscow, in line with its pivot to the East and the establishment of the Greater Eurasian Partnership, must appropriately respond.

## CONCLUSION

In the years to come, the influence of the Belt and Road Initiative on the global evolution will increase. China is ready to offer the world the advantages that no other international actor possesses and is ready to give its partners. This is particularly valuable considering the rise of the confrontational paradigm in the current global affairs.

The fact that China expects return, including political-strategic, on its investment is hardly surprising. As a power with global ambitions substantiated by sufficient resources, China naturally expects its share of the global pie. If China is able to do it to the best advantage of its BRI partners, this should be only welcomed. However, the PRC's partners are unlikely to put up with the rising gap between the economic and the political implications of the Belt and Road Initiative.

To narrow this gap, for China cooperation with Russia in Southeast Asia becomes a new strategic priority. With assets which are markedly absent in the arsenal of other ASEAN's other extra-regional partners, the Russian Federation has real, rather than declaratory, possibilities to develop win-win cooperation responding to the interests of all its participants. This experience will provide Beijing and Moscow with possibilities for the modus operandi in other regions of the Eurasian continent.

Given that Russia and China are two great Eurasian powers, their cooperation in Eurasia is a demand of time. Southeast Asia, in which Russia and China do not see each other as competitors while ASEAN strives to raise its global profile, which by its very definition means an upgrade of relationship with global powers, has all prerequisites to make this cooperation successful.

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